



CRIG BIRLE

*This mountain lion is easy to spot at Dakota Zoo in Bismarck. In the wild, spying one of these elusive animals is more difficult. Even so, there were more and more reports of mountain lions in the state in 2004 – some of them confirmed.*

# Mountain

## A Status Report

By Ron Wilson

Mountain lions are living in North Dakota. More than a century ago, this reclusive animal was said to have disappeared from the state, only to make infrequent curtain calls – a set of four-toed tracks left here, a fleeting sighting there – starting in the late 1950s. Most of the well-established reports came from the badlands in southwest North Dakota where – oil rigs and development aside – the country seemed well-suited for an animal that hungers for both secrecy and venison.

### Protected Cats

Mountain lions are currently protected in North Dakota unless they are an immediate threat to people or livestock. However, they are considered a furbearer, and the State Game and Fish Department could open a season, by governor's proclamation, if it was warranted.

An amendment to a law will be introduced during the 2005 legislative session that would require anyone catching or killing a mountain lion or black bear that was threatening humans or livestock to turn the animal over to the Department within 24 hours. Animal carcasses will provide additional information wildlife managers need to understand the state's current mountain lion situation.

# n Lions in North Dakota



## *"There is no question about us having mountain lions in North Dakota,"*

For years, mountain lions reported in the state were dubbed as transients or maybe the occasional territorial animal in some remote neck of North Dakota like the rugged badlands or forested Turtle Mountains. With cougar populations expanding in other Western states, and evidence of animals sometimes venturing hundreds of miles east looking for new and not-spoken-for territory, it's certainly not a stretch to imagine lions settling in North Dakota.

"There is no question about us having mountain lions in North Dakota," said Dean Hildebrand, Director of the State Game and Fish Department. "Some of them are transient animals, and some are likely resident lions. With that said, there is still a lot that we don't know."

Most of the transient wanderers are probably juvenile males looking for their own territory; country not inhabited by adult males that would kill them for the intrusion. According to recent research, cougars will travel longer distances than originally believed in search of new digs. It was reported in 2004 that a mountain lion wearing a radio tracking collar was killed by a train near Red Rock, Oklahoma. To get there, the animal had traveled 661 miles in 266 days from the Black Hills in South Dakota, twice as far as earlier research had indicated the cats would venture.

"It tells us they can move long distances in relatively short periods, and that extends their range considerably," Jonathan Jenks, a South Dakota State University researcher who tracks mountain lions, told USA Today. He said it is unclear whether cougars have established new populations outside their traditional range or whether a small number of young males are simply straying farther. At least 50 cats, Jenks continued, are probably needed to create a population that reproduces itself.

Trying to put a figure on the number of mountain lions – also known as cougar, puma, panther and catamount – in North Dakota would simply be a wild guess. For sure, reports of mountain lions in the state – confirmed or otherwise – have shot up. In 2004 alone, there were 58 reports, with seven confirmed and 10 others ruled as probable by wildlife officials. Of note, one of the confirmed reports was a young female lion shot by a nonresident bowhunter, who felt threatened by the animal, while hunting deer in September in the badlands.

In the previous 40-plus years, however, there were fewer than 100 reports. While 36 of those reports were confirmed, officials figured in some instances it was the same animal being reported more than once.

Because a young female lion was killed in the badlands in 2004, it could be suspected,

### **Appearance**

Mountain lions are typically tawny to light cinnamon in color with black-tipped ears and tail.

Animals vary in size, with males being larger than females. Adult males may be more than 8 feet in length, including the tail, and weigh 120-180 pounds. Adult females may be up to 7 feet long and weigh 85-130 pounds. Bobcats, in comparison, average 30 inches in length, have short tails and weigh about 25 pounds. Coyotes average 42-52 inches in length, have long tails and weigh about 30-40 pounds.



*said Dean Hildebrand, Director of the State Game and Fish Department.*

considering young males do most, but not all, of the long distance dispersing, that she was born in western North Dakota. "Nearly 100 percent of the males disperse from their mothers, but typically the females don't disperse very far from home," said Jacquie Ermer, Game and Fish Department furbearer and disease biologist. "We can't say for sure she was born and raised in North Dakota. But there is a good chance she was because females typically don't disperse far from where they were born."

Mountain lions are ambush hunters, waiting in concealment for prey to wander by. A silent stalk ensues, followed by a quick sprint, and ending with the big cat breaking the neck of unsuspecting prey. The lion feeds – sometimes 20 or more pounds of meat in a single meal – then caches what is left under leaves and other debris. Scientists tell us these predators feed mostly on deer and elk, but also supplement their diets with porcupines, mice, rabbits, and other small game. "Mountain lions not only need prey to survive, but they need concealment cover that enhances their chances of catching prey," said Dorothy Fecske, a South Dakota researcher who studied cougars for five years in the Black Hills. "Parts of North Dakota have these needed components."

Some sort of investigation is needed, Hildebrand said, to determine the status of mountain lions in North Dakota. "How large that study will be has yet to be answered," he said. "These things can be expensive, yet we need to make some type of determination of what's out there and what to do."

That's easier said than done as mountain lions are unlike a lot of other animals, which makes them difficult to study. "They are an elusive animal, not highly visible and not easy to study," Ermer said. "There aren't any quick, reliable methods to determine their numbers. We just can't go out and fly an aerial survey and find out how many mountain lions we have in North Dakota."

The idea, maybe, would be to capture and radio-collar some animals for study purposes. "I think we could find five lions to put collars on in the western part of the state, and maybe the Turtle Mountains, but it might take us a while," Ermer said. "At this point, I think it's just as important to say that we do have lions in the state, and that not all of them are just dispersing through. My gut feeling is that we have both – animals moving in from other states and animals that are breeding here."

The reason for the jump in cougar sightings the last few years – 2004 in particular – is likely manifold. "Since the young female lion was killed in the badlands this past September, the reports jumped significantly," Ermer said. "Mountain lions are on peoples' radar screens. They are something people find interesting, new, intriguing, and even scary ... And if they see something, they can't wait to call and let us know."

Unconfirmed reports, however, outnumber confirmed sightings. "People are mistaking cougars for dogs, coyotes ..." Ermer said. "It's hard to tell what you are looking at in the middle of the night through your headlights."

Reports have climbed, Hildebrand said, because more people are hunting today than



## Cougar Confirmed in Grand Forks County

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department on December 7 confirmed the sighting of a mountain lion in Grand Forks County. While the state had already confirmed six other sightings in 2004, this mountain lion was of particular interest because it was wearing an active radio-collar, attached by South Dakota State University researchers late last winter in the Black Hills.

The young male mountain lion was observed December 5 near Turtle River State Park, about 20 miles west of Grand Forks. Because of its radio-collar, Game and Fish personnel can keep track of the animal's whereabouts, in cooperation with SDSU. "This is a unique opportunity to learn something about mountain lion movement," said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief. "As long as it's not causing problems we'll continue to monitor it closely."

Jacquie Ermer, Department furbearer biologist, said the young male was probably looking for a female companion and a new territory to establish, and most likely wouldn't stay around very long. "I suspect he is going to keep traveling to find a female mate," she said.

The SDSU research project is centered in the Black Hills near Rapid City, where mountain lions are well established, and is investigating juvenile mountain lion dispersal and survival. The Grand Forks County cat's last previous confirmed signal had been in September in the Slim Buttes area of Harding County in northwestern South Dakota.

On December 22, the cougar's signal was confirmed in northwest Minnesota, about 40 miles from the North Dakota border.

## Cougar Reports

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has kept a database of confirmed and unconfirmed mountain lion sightings in the state since 1958. Officials here want sightings to be reported, and you can do that by calling your local Department district office, or call Game and Fish headquarters in Bismarck at 328-6300, or Jacquie Ermer, Department furbearer and disease biologist at 654-7475.

While confirming a sighting of one of nature's most elusive animals takes some doing, Game and Fish officials don't want to discourage citizens from making the call. More often than not, reports of mountain lions turn out to be dogs running in the shadows or maybe a fleeting glimpse of a coyote in fading light. Media accounts of livestock tangling with mountain lions – rather than with barbed wire fences as officials later determined – have also fueled the rumor mill.

Even so, make the call and let wildlife experts help to determine what you've seen.



## *The law says we are going to protect mountain lions in North Dakota.*

### Cat Facts

- Mountain lions are classified as a furbearer in North Dakota. Since there is no open season, it is illegal to kill a lion in the state, unless for self-protection, or if the animal is depredating livestock.

- Deer and elk are most common prey. Hunt by ambush and stalking, but can outrun a deer for only short distances. Mountain lions are good climbers and jumpers; can leap up to 20 feet.

- Cover unconsumed portions of their kills with dirt and leaves.

- Prefer dense cover or rocky, rugged terrain.

- Home ranges, depending on terrain and availability of food, is about 50-75 square miles for females and 90-120 square miles for males.

- Females can breed at 18 months, but generally do not until they establish a territory. Females give birth at 2-3 year intervals, with litter sizes from 1-5 kittens.

- Kittens are born blind and weigh about a pound. Young leave mom at 12 to 18 months.

ever before, some venturing into remote parts of the state. "More and more people are hiking and biking the Maah Daah Hey Trail in the badlands, too. With more people out and about in the badlands, the more opportunities there are for sightings."

Rumors of lions on the landscape also have a way of escalating reports. "Once a rumor starts, it's easy to start seeing things," Hildebrand said. "Dogs running in the shadows, tracks in the mud that you're convinced were left by a lion. It takes a pretty skilled person to determine if it's an actual cougar print."

To get a fix on how extraordinary it is to see a mountain lion in the wild, understand that Fecske, who spent five years studying cats in the Black Hills, can count on one hand her chance encounters. "In all that time, I had only two sightings," she said. "One sighting was when I was looking for tracks and saw a female with three kittens. Another was when I was doing some work with pine martens and saw a cat in some spruce stands. It's a rare and special thing to see a cat in the wild."

Mountain lions are brighter on the Game and Fish Department's radar screen today than, say, 10 years ago, Hildebrand said,

because of public concern and increased sightings. "We sat down with USDA-Wildlife Services and came up with a response plan," he said. "One of the factors we have to consider is how the citizens and landowners in western North Dakota, where the mountain lion population has a better chance to be more predominant, feel about having these animals on the landscape."

The law says we're going to protect mountain lions in North Dakota. After a female lion was shot in a barn in the badlands in 1991, a law was written to classify these animals as furbearers. Mountain lions cannot be caught or killed unless they are an immediate threat to livestock.

Since the mid-1960s, regulations on harvesting mountain lions by all Western states and Canadian provinces, Texas not included, have fostered a rebound from historical low levels. The cougar population in Montana, for example, has grown and expanded into the eastern portion of the state where a season was opened in 1989. Initially, hunters could take five lions in this eastern region bordering North Dakota, but that number has now grown to a quota of 20 animals.

Confirmed reports from states like Iowa, Minnesota and farther east continue to pop up. High deer populations in these states, like North Dakota is experiencing, might explain this unusual presence of mountain lions, some speculate. Then again, fat deer numbers may just be the easy answer. "Scientists don't have a good answer for the eastward movement of mountain lions into habitat that is seemingly not well suited for these elusive animals," Ermer said. "It's a question biologists here and elsewhere are trying to answer."

The other question state wildlife managers must answer is what to do with mountain lions now that we have them – at least, possibly, in countable numbers – after such a long hiatus? "There are differing views: some people say to leave them alone, some say let's have a season, and some want them killed," Ermer said. "How we view mountain lions is one of the dilemmas the Department is facing now."

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**RON WILSON** is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

### Tracks

In an unhurried walk, mountain lions place their hind paw in the imprint made by their front paw. They have four teardrop-shaped toes with three distinct lobes at the base of the pad. Claw marks typically are not visible since their claws are retractable.

Mountain lion tracks are big, roughly 3 to 3.5 inches across. Compare that to a coyote track that is about 2 inches across.

Mountain lions are solitary animals. Adult males almost always travel alone. If tracks indicate two or more lions traveling together, it's probably a female with kittens.